Old Fire Hall Pilot Project

AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

November 2007

Department of Tourism and Culture
Government of Yukon

Table of contents

	Page
Background	***2***
Evaluation Methodology	***2***
The Old Fire Hall Program	***3***
Program Logic Model	***4***
Evaluation Questions	***5***
Findings and Conclusions	***5***
Was the project carried out as planned?	***6***
To what extent did the project achieve or contribute to its goal?	***7***
What factors contributed to or detracted from achieving the goal?	***8***
What would have made the project more successful?	***9***
Does the community support this type of venture?	***9***
What lessons from this project could be applied to future projects?	***11***
Considerations for future projects	***13***
Conclusion	***14***

Background

Commercial activity in the downtown core of Whitehorse has been in steady decline for a number of years. Although the experience of individual businesses varies, there is general agreement that retail business is slowly being lost to the Argus commercial area and other businesses in the city's north end.

The Yukon government and other interested parties saw an opportunity to help reverse this trend by using the Old Fire Hall as a venue for commercial and cultural activities during the summer of 2007. A heritage building previously occupied by the Canada Winter Games Host Society, the Old Fire Hall had reverted to Yukon government control following the Games.

The Yukon Department of Tourism and Culture (T&C) joined with the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce (WCC) and the Yukon Arts Centre (YAC) to carry out a pilot project in the summer of 2007. The project made the Old Fire Hall available for use by various parties for a wide range of commercial arts and cultural activities plus other commercial uses. The expectation was that using the Old Fire Hall in this way would draw more people to the downtown and the waterfront area and would thereby revitalise the area.

At the conclusion of the project, T&C engaged an evaluation consultant through a public-tender process to carry out an independent assessment and evaluation. The evaluation was intended to determine the extent to which the pilot project achieved its goals, and to secure feedback from user groups and others concerning specific issues surrounding the project.

Evaluation Methodology

The consultants carried out the following steps in completing this evaluation report:

1. Met with the department to review the Request For Proposal to ensure a common understanding of what was needed
2. Interviewed the proponents of the project to help scope out the evaluation and determine the main evaluation questions
3. Developed and secured consensus on the questions to be addressed in this evaluation (see following section)
4. Developed a research plan that described what information would be collected and what methods would be used; secured T&C agreement with the plan
5. Interviewed the key informants to obtain their input; persons/organisations participating broke out as follows:

Type of organisation/individual represented	#
Proponents / Providers	6
Main Street and Area Businesses	15
User Groups	4
Others including neighbours and heritage organisations	9
Total	***34***

6. Reviewed two separate reports on the project, as prepared by 1) Kristina Mercs, OFH Facility Coordinator; and 2) Rick Karp, President of the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce; these reports included considerable feedback from vendors who participated in the Old Fire Hall Arts and Crafts Market
7. Reviewed and analyzed all the data to address the evaluation questions, prepared a draft evaluation report and obtained feedback
8. Prepared the final version of the evaluation report.

It is important to note that the scope of the project was defined largely by the budget and time constraints. For example, an economic impact study of the pilot project was not possible, and the focus of the study was on securing feedback from informed stakeholders. The consultants collected and analyzed the agreed data from the defined sources in order to address the evaluation questions. While that process provides useful information and enables the consultants to make relevant recommendations, the findings are based almost entirely on the perceptions and impressions of those interviewed and are not supported by extensive quantitative data.

The Old Fire Hall Program

The broad goals of the project/program were to promote an increase in the vitality of the Whitehorse waterfront and the attractiveness of the downtown core. The Contribution Agreement between T&C and WCC served as a guide for its implementation.

Given the unique characteristics of this new venture, it took considerable time to negotiate the terms and conditions that would govern the project. This was a novel project that represented uncharted territory for both the Yukon government and the Chamber. Furthermore, the Yukon government had no policy to govern the use of its heritage buildings for commercial purposes. As a result, the agreement was not finalized and the project approved until the end of May 2007, just a few days prior to the official opening.

T&C provided the venue itself on behalf of the Yukon government and entered into an agreement with WCC to sponsor and direct the pilot project. The Yukon Arts Centre managed the facility, booked events, and provided technical expertise in such areas as audio-visual, lighting and display requirements. The pilot project ran from mid-May to mid-September; events took place from June 1 to August 31. During this 90-day period, about 60 distinct events were held that attracted approximately 15,000 people.

In discussions with the parties, the evaluation consultants developed the following simple logic model to demonstrate how the program was intended to work.

Program Logic Model

Goals	Contribute to the vitality of life in and attractiveness of the downtown Whitehorse core Use a Yukon government owned heritage building in a respectful and sustainable way for the benefit of the public
Inputs	Old Fire Hall facility Furnishings and equipment $22,000 contribution YAC's venue management and technical skills WCC's overall project and facility management skills
Activities	Advertising and promotion Rental of the space
Outputs	Arts and culture events Other events Operation of artists market
Outcomes	Availability of performance/market space User groups stage events People attend events, purchase merchandise Increased traffic and activity in the downtown/waterfront area Heritage building put to good use
Impacts	Downtown is a more vital place Downtown is a more attractive place Economic benefits increased Quality of life enhanced

Evaluation Questions

Early in the project, the consultants proposed evaluation questions to guide the research. These were discussed with the department and the final version of these questions follows:

1. Was the project carried out as planned?
2. To what extent did the project achieve or contribute to its goal?
3. What factors contributed to or detracted from achieving the goal?
4. What would have made the project more successful?
5. Does the community support this type of venture?
6. What lessons learned from this project could be applied to increase the likelihood of success for future projects?

Findings and Conclusions

It is important to keep in mind throughout this evaluation that the subject of the review is a pilot project with a very short (three months) track record. The aim of the project was to try something a bit innovative, see how it worked, and use the experience to improve future endeavours. There is insufficient experience or data to draw many precise conclusions about goal achievement or impacts.

This evaluation was mainly about soliciting opinions and perceptions from knowledgeable informants. No evaluation plan was developed prior to the pilot project and no targets were defined. Consequently, there was no rigorous data collection throughout the course of the pilot project related to the evaluation questions and targets. Given this lack of hard data related to the evaluation questions, the feedback that was obtained was all opinion.

That said, a good cross-section of key informants was interviewed. Included were downtown businesses operating close to the location of the Old Fire Hall, merchants who sell products similar to those sold at the Arts and Crafts Market that was held regularly at the venue throughout the summer, users of the space, and others with an interest in arts, culture or heritage. Consequently, the information gathered was broad based and was sufficient to make informed judgements about the answers to the evaluation questions.

Findings and conclusions are presented here in relation to each of the evaluation questions.

- ***Was the project carried out as planned?***

Perhaps due in large part to pressure from the arts and cultural community to make the Old Fire Hall available, and the need to move quickly to implementation, neither T&C, WCC, nor YAC prepared any planning documentation to outline what was expected to happen. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the proponents agreed on the key elements that would be present or would take place. These include the following:

- The Old Fire Hall facility would be made available for arts, culture and other groups to use
- Appropriate furnishings and equipment would be supplied
- The Department would provide a $22,000 contribution to the project
- YAC would provide venue management and technical skills
- WCC would provide overall project and facility management skills
- Advertising and promotion would be done to make people aware of the venue and attract users and members of the public to participate
- User groups would rent the space
- Arts and culture and other events would take place at the venue
- Visitors and local residents would come and participate.

All of these things did in fact take place, to a greater or lesser degree. In addition, an artists market operated on a regular basis for most of the summer, two weeks on and two weeks off.

The report from the YAC provides detailed numbers for attendance at the various events on a daily basis. Over the three and a half months the facility was available, it was open and operating 57 days. Close to 15,000 people crossed the threshold.

The Art and Craft Market averaged just under 200 visitors per day, with a high of close to 1200 on Canada Day. Several of the vendors were pleased with these numbers.

The Hot Comedy shows averaged 36 attendees with a high of 52.

Attendance at other events ranged from 15 to 120.

The one area in which expectations, however vague, were not met was in advertising and promotion of the venue. While no quantitative measure was put forward for such activity, the clear consensus of those involved in the project was that the level of promotion was inadequate. Retailers in particular cited this factor as the main factor limiting attendance at the Art and Craft Market.

- ***To what extent did the project achieve or contribute to its goal?***

Several arts and cultural events were staged in the venue. These included stand-up, sketches and musical comedy nights, a live music performance and some break-dance performances. In addition, other events took place including a WCC Business After Hours, a going-away party with film screenings and some receptions, as well as the operation of the artists market. There is some thought that the number and variety of uses could have been greater.

Performance/market space was made available.

User groups staged events.

People attended events and purchased merchandise. The traffic flow through the facility was seen by many people as exceeding their expectations.

Several people reported that they had observed increased traffic and activity in the downtown/waterfront area.

There is a very high degree of consensus that this heritage building was put to good use. There were many reports of visitors and locals making positive comments about the venue.

Was the downtown a more vital place? Was the quality of life in Whitehorse enhanced? Was the downtown a more attractive place? It is next to impossible to measure these factors in any objective manner. Nevertheless, there are some indications the level of activity and the amount of pedestrian traffic increased as a result of activities at the Old Fire Hall. Many respondents stressed that these sorts of changes will take years to be seen. It will not happen overnight.

Several respondents, primarily local merchants, said that a venture such as this cannot possibly demonstrate its value in a few short months. Many of these respondents strongly support the concept but cautioned that it takes time for something like this to catch on. People need to become aware of it and need to get used to the idea of using the facility. Therefore, the proponents need to recognise that volumes of visits and activities are likely to increase steadily over the initial "breaking-in" period until the awareness of the facility realises its potential. If the pilot runs in summer only, this process will likely take several years.

There is no solid evidence to suggest that economic benefits increased in general in the downtown area, beyond the direct impact on users of this facility. Attribution of such benefits to this project would require research into economic impacts that was not possible under this evaluation. Several local merchants reported increases in sales over last summer; some said they'd had their best year ever. None of these merchants was willing to suggest any relationship between these financial results and the presence of the Old Fire Hall Pilot Project.

► What factors contributed to or detracted from achieving the goal?

Many people stated that the success of the pilot project was hampered in a major way by the timing of the decision to proceed. This resulted in everything being done on a last-minute basis. It also meant that many potential users of the space had already made their plans for the summer season by the time the venue's availability became known.

The short lead-time between the decision to proceed with the project and the actual opening of the facility was not sufficient to permit the level of advance marketing and promotion that would have been desirable.

Many respondents noted that poor signage and lack of effective promotion limited participation by users and the public in general. Some respondents said the hand-written notices on sandwich boards were not impressive and reflected badly on the project. It was reported that adherence to government policies regarding signage on heritage buildings prevented the sort of promotion that would have made a significant difference in attracting people to the site.

A few stakeholders in the heritage community commented on the lack of consultation or inclusiveness in the project. They did not expect a long and involved process, but thought it would have been more appropriate to inform them about the process ahead of time and give them an opportunity to voice concerns or make suggestions. While they were supportive of the venture, they might have been even more supportive if they had been included early in the process. Also, they might have been in a position to offer ideas for heritage interpretation or other ways to improve on the project.

A potential user of the facility was concerned that some potential users were informed and were able to book space before others were even aware of the facility's availability. By the time this organisation became aware of the opportunity to book the facility, their planned use of it was not possible due to commitments that had already been made to another user group.

A number of people commented on the requirement to obtain the Premier's signature on any application for a liquor permit for the facility. It would seem that whatever government policy imposes that requirement was likely intended to cover situations quite different from those to which it was applied this summer.

With regard to the sale of arts and crafts, a few people suggested the importance of distinguishing this market from markets in other places by focusing on locally produced goods rather than mass-produced goods imported from Outside. Others said they thought an emphasis on First Nation goods would be a positive step.

There were many reports of friction between the management of the market and the artists and craftspeople participating in the market. This dissention, or the issues that led to it, may have limited the success of the arts and crafts market.

- ***What would have made the project more successful?***

An earlier announcement would have enabled more effective promotion. This in turn would have increased the likelihood of local user groups booking space. Starting earlier would have enabled some of the challenges to be identified earlier and would have provided sufficient time to devise effective means of dealing with the challenges. As it was, there was little or no time to plan or work through such things.

An example was the classic conflict between block booking and regular-event bookings. The compromise that was decided on met no one's needs fully and limited the utility of the venue for showcasing a wide range and variety of events and attractions.

A related issue is the perceived value of having consistent, regular schedules for events and markets. If people know that every Wednesday night there is a play, or every Friday night there is a musical performance, it seems more likely they will begin to embrace the offerings. If they are never quite sure what is happening when, they may not take the trouble to find out, and attendance could suffer.

Starting early and investing sufficient marketing and promotion funds would have likely increased the level of awareness and interest among the arts and culture community and the public at large.

Several respondents were disappointed at the absence of heritage interpretative displays at the Old Fire Hall. It was felt that this would have been possible at little cost and would have enhanced the experience of participants while also meeting heritage objectives—a win-win situation.

Several respondents suggested minor renovation to enable the large doors on First Avenue to be opened, which would make the venue much more inviting to passers-by. Currently, the building has very limited appeal to anyone walking along First Avenue as it appears closed up and unwelcoming.

- ***Does the community support this type of venture?***

Almost without exception, respondents indicated enthusiastic support for using heritage buildings for arts and cultural activities to draw locals and visitors to the downtown/waterfront area of town. A few local merchants were misinformed and expressed concern that the artists market was heavily subsidised. Even these

merchants, however, were in favour of using the buildings to attract people downtown. Several other merchants expressed vigorous support for this type of activity.

One respondent suggested that providing free or low-cost space to groups who would not otherwise be in a position to use the space would be quite acceptable since it did not take business away from commercial providers of space. Without a break in the cost of the venue, such groups would simply not rent space at all. Therefore, their ability to get a cheaper rent in this venue would not take business away from a commercial landlord.

Many respondents said they would like to see a wide variety of uses for the buildings. They supported using the buildings for arts and cultural activities, but would not like to see the use of the building confined strictly to arts and cultural activities. Several people said that using these buildings for office space was not a good option since it contributed little to animating the waterfront.

Two residents of Closeleigh were strongly opposed to amplified music at the venue. Both of these people were highly supportive of the use of the facility as long as care was taken not to disturb the neighbours. Others at Closeleigh who were consulted were either strongly supportive without reservation or were neutral.

Members of the heritage community were universally in favour of the use of heritage buildings in this way. Several stated the need to be careful to ensure preservation of the heritage values.

In late summer 2005 a project was undertaken to assess the impact of the Longest Days Street Fair. The report of that project included the following excerpt:

"The business survey included some statements to further gauge business perceptions of the Longest Days Street Fair. It is worth noting that for all of the following statements, over 80 percent of business respondents either "Strongly Agreed" or "Agreed" that:

- Street Fair made Whitehorse fun to be in.
- Tourists highly value local cultural events.
- Tourists and locals make plans for cultural events.
- Street Fair made Whitehorse a more enjoyable place to be in the summer.
- Public cultural events draw customers to downtown Whitehorse.
- Whitehorse's arts and culture community can be a major draw for tourism.
- Whitehorse's arts and culture community increases local participation in the city.
- Street Fair should include major outdoor evening presentations.

"This indicates that, despite mixed sales results due to Street Fair, businesses are generally very supportive of the event and see it as a positive for business."

It is likely that many of the views expressed would apply more broadly to the sort of arts and cultural activity that took place this summer at the Old Fire Hall.

Many respondents said they thought the building should be open year round. Several users indicated interest in booking the space outside of the short summer season.

Several respondents had the impression there was major reluctance on the part of government to allow the building to be used for commercial purposes. Government was apparently concerned that local merchants and others would see this facility and its operations as unfair competition. The majority of merchants consulted were of the opposite opinion—more activity is good for all.

A well-accepted principle of merchandising holds that incremental business activity in an area has a synergistic effect. In the Whitehorse situation, cultural and commercial activities at the Old Fire Hall attract a larger market than is normally available to downtown merchants. Rather than taking market share away from existing businesses, the project increases the size of the market available for all businesses. Everyone benefits. The vast majority of downtown merchants appear to recognize this principle.

Several said that the real competition is not among Main Street businesses, but rather between the collective of Main Street businesses and businesses in other locations, such as the Argus area north of downtown or even other cities and towns. These downtown merchants do not see increased commerce on Main Street and nearby as a threat; they welcome it.

In light of the almost universal support for this free market concept, the myth of "unfair competition" levelled against such projects as the Old Fire Hall should no longer be an issue.

One factor discussed with most respondents was the rental rate for the space. Many respondents had no opinion and seemed not to care about the rate. Those who ventured an opinion were divided: some felt it was fair; a few thought the rate represented a subsidy but were unable to explain how that worked; many thought the rental rate was too high.

► *What lessons from this project could be applied to future projects?*

1. Start early. Notice of intent to make the facility available should be passed to prospective users at least six months prior to opening, to allow sufficient time to plan and coordinate summer activities. This period also allows time for WCC and YAC to implement marketing strategies, develop signage, arrange equipment, and so on.

2. Engage and involve all potential stakeholders early enough to allow them to have input and to enable effective responses to that input. Perhaps hold a reception prior to opening and extend direct personal invitations to relevant stakeholders including downtown merchants, members of the heritage community and members of the arts and cultural community. This would be an opportunity to build bridges, explain how the project would be carried out and explore potential partnerships or linkages among the various parties. It would also help to avoid some of the misconceptions that were evident this time around.

3. Devote sufficient resources to ensure effective marketing and promotion of the venue, both to potential users and to potential audience members. One focus might be to encourage effective cross-fertilisation among all of the vendors and attractions in the neighbourhood. A good place to start would be with staff of the Waterfront Trolley, the Visitor Information Centre and MacBride Museum. Staff at each location could encourage visitors to visit the other sites.

4. Ensure all potential users of the space have an equitable shot at booking the space.

5. Provide heritage interpretative information at the venue where appropriate and where it does not conflict with other uses. Combine heritage interpretative displays with active uses of the heritage buildings. For example, stage an exhibit about fire-fighting in Whitehorse that would be available for the entire summer.

6. Launch the venue in a big way by staging a week-long opening festival.

7. Open the First Avenue doors.

8. Consider making the venue available on a year-round basis, perhaps for weekends only in the winter as a first step.

9. Encourage the sale of locally-produced goods, including perhaps an emphasis on Yukon First Nation goods, rather than mass-produced goods from other places.

10. Find a satisfactory solution to the conflict between block bookings and regular weekly bookings.

11. Consistency of scheduling is a very important consideration for a project such as this. Interest, awareness and repeat business will be achieved to the extent the timing and scheduling of offerings in the venue are consistent and predictable. If people come expecting one thing and find another, they may not bother coming back again. Similarly, if they come back to the market and their favourite vendor is not there that day, they may not bother coming back

12. Develop and communicate a clear and specific policy with regard to the types of uses that will be allowed and those that are not permitted.

13. Use extensive signage to lead people to the Old Fire Hall from other parts of downtown and the waterfront.

14. Use extensive signage and other visual and auditory features at the location itself (even the smell of food cooking) to catch the attention of passers-by and attract them to come and check out activities.

15. Consider on-location radio broadcasts to get the word out.

Considerations for future projects

1. Make a "go" decision well before the timing of the opening of the facility. Managers and potential users need a minimum of six months to plan the program.

2. Prepare a formal, written plan for the project, including specific goals and objectives as well as specific measures of success—in effect a description of what would be considered a successful outcome. The most appropriate body to do this planning would be WCC since it is they who are managing the project. All the key players should have input to the planning process and should agree on the major elements of the plan.

3. Design a research program and collect data to enable measurement of the key success factors periodically and at the end of the project.

4. If a similar project is planned for the Old Fire Hall next summer, consider staging an opening festival. This would include engaging an artistic director and providing sufficient funding to book artists and performers in a strategic way to ensure a wide range of performances. In this way, many audiences could be attracted to participate and the awareness and interest in the community would almost certainly be higher than was the case this summer. It seems this year everything was done on a purely opportunistic basis.

5. If a building is going to be operated for commercial purposes, operate the venue in a commercial manner. That includes effective marketing and promotion, simple contractual and booking arrangements and fair market rentals to commercial enterprises.

6. Adjust the liquor-license policy to remove the requirement for the Premier's signature on every licence application.

7. Consider allowing non-profit activities to take place at a reduced rate or for free if they contribute to the goals of the project. Examples could include exhibits of art work that is not for sale and demonstrations by artists.

Conclusion

Several factors worked to limit the chances of this venture being successful. These included a late start, limited budget and limited advertising, signage and promotion.

Despite those shortcomings, there was considerable activity in the Old Fire Hall during the summer of 2007. Local merchants, the heritage community, the arts and culture community and the public at large seem to have accepted the project and embraced it. Attendance numbers were quite respectable and exceeded the expectations of many of our informants.

There is considerable broad-based support for this type of activity in this location. With more extensive planning and an earlier start, it is likely that a similar project next year would have even better results.